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SUBJECT: ONE HEART, MANY DIVIDES: ETHNIC AFFILIATION IN ERITREA

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

¶1. The shared experience of the 30-year struggle for independence created a strong sense of national identity for most Eritreans. The Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) promotes Eritrea as having "one heart" or "hade libbi" in Tigrinya - a motto that is seen often in the days leading up to Eritrean Independence Day on May 24. The efforts of the GSE to establish a sense of nationality that is greater than an ethnic or religious affiliation extends back during the time of the struggle for independence. Isaias Afwerki, now Eritrea's President, and the other leaders of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) believed that overcoming ethnic and religious identities by creating a nationalism that was stronger was critical to a unified and successful Eritrea. This approach also limited divisive issues around which Eritreans could organize and thereby minimized threats to the EPLF positions.

¶2. Despite the efforts by the GSE to describe Eritrea as having "one heart," ethnicity, religious affiliation, and regional ties continue to have an impact on the political and social fabric of Eritrea. While these divisions often go unobserved by foreigners, they are an everyday reality for many Eritreans and often surface during disagreements and periods of tension. End Summary.

THE EIGHT AREAS, ELEVEN ETHNIC GROUPS AND THE SIX ZOBAS

¶3. In 1996, the GSE divided Eritrea into six administrative districts or zobas: Maekel, Debub, Anseba, Southern Red Sea, Northern Red Sea, and Gash Barka. These six zobas are administrative only and overlap eight ethnic and cultural areas, which had emerged during the Italian and British colonial periods. The eight ethnic and cultural areas of Eritrea, with their "capital" cities are: Akeleguzay (Dekemhare), Barka (Agordat), Hamasien (Asmara), Sahel (Nakfa), Semhar (Massawa), Senhit (Keren), and Seraye (Mendefera). Seven of the eight ethnic and cultural areas are dominated by one religious group, either Christian or Muslim.

¶4. Some of these areas have their own languages and many have sub-groups with alliances that pre-date Eritrea's struggle for independence. Many of the movements during the struggle began as local or regional movements. Even today, these ties to organizations from the struggle, such as the EPLF and the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) play a role in Eritrea's social fabric. Eight ethnic groups are officially recognized by the GSE and largely reside in distinct geographic areas, as do three other large ethnic

groups not officially recognized by the government. The eight official ethnic groups, Tigrinya, Saho, Blen, Tigre, Kunama, Rashaida, Nara, and the Afar, have strong ties to their areas and maintain their own languages. The Djeberti, Hadareb-Beja, and the Tukrir are ethnic groups that are not officially recognized by the GSE, although the Hadareb, a sub-group of the Beja are often considered the ninth ethnic group of Eritrea.

EIGHTY PERCENT OF ERITREA: THE TIGRINYA AND THE TIGRE

15. The Tigrinya ethnic group dominates the areas of Akeleguzay, Seraye, and Hamasien. Often referred to as the "Christian Highlanders," they are Tigrinya speakers. Most are Christian -- Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox Christian -- although there are highlanders who are Muslim, including the Djeberti sub-group from Seraye. The Muslim Djebertis originated in the Tigray region of Ethiopia although they have resided in Eritrea for centuries. They consider themselves to be a separate ethnic group from the Tigrinya; however, as their ethnic language is Tigrinya, the GSE denied their request to be recognized as an official ethnic group. The Akeleguzay, Seraye, Hamasien, and Djeberti are considered the four sub-groups of the Tigrinya and some older Eritreans maintain these social distinctions quite strongly, objecting to marriages across the sub-groups. Many Christian Tigrinyans consider the Muslim Djeberti to be of a lower status. Among the younger generation, these distinctions have blurred to some extent into just being Tigrinya; however, the historic alliances and tensions remain.

16. The Hamasien region, the area around Asmara, is the historic center of power in the region. Many perceive that Hamasiens, because of their residence in Asmara, tend to have access to better

ASMARA 00000945 002 OF 004

educational opportunities, giving them an advantage over their fellow Eritreans from other regions. Within the Hamasien, there are at least three sub-groups: Karenshim, Dembezan, and Seharti. The majority of the senior government officials are Tigrinya. For example, President Isaias is a Tigrinya, Hamasien from Karneshim. The Head of Cultural Affairs for the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, Zemehret Yohannes and Abraha Kassa, Head of the Office of National Security are Akeleguzay. The Minister of Tourism, Amna Nour Hussein, is a Djeberti. Minister Abraha Asfaha, the Minister of Public Works, and the Minister of Finance, Berhane Abrehe are Seraye. A majority of the Embassy locally employed staff is Hamasien.

17. The Hamasien-Tigrinya ethnic group were the founders of the EPLF and found easy recruits in their fellow Tigrinya speakers and historic allies, the Seraye and the Akeleguzay. Yet despite these alliances, the Hamasien sub-group tend to be overly represented in the current regime, a situation resented by some Akeleguzay who believe they provided more fighters during the struggle and suffered more than others but have not received their fair share even today.

18. The Tigre people, together with the Tigrinya, comprise nearly eighty percent of Eritrea's population. Some estimate that thirty to forty percent of Eritrea's population is Tigre. Occupying areas in the north and west of Eritrea bordering Sudan, they are mostly Muslims. Living in the historic regions of Semhar, Sahel, and northern Barka, many are nomadic shepherds. The Tigre language, like Tigrinya, is considered a Semitic language. Saleh Meky, the Minister of Health, is from the Tigre ethnic group.

ALONG THE COAST: THE AFAR AND THE RASHAIDA

19. The Afar, also called the Danakils, live in the Danakalia region, or Southern Red Sea zoba. Predominantly Muslim, Afars also live in Djibouti and Ethiopia. Many of them are herders and fisherman, while some participate in regional trade and engage in the black market. Ethnic affiliation is strong for the Afar people. Many Afar prioritize their ethnic identity ahead of nationality, with some advocating for the establishment of an Afar nation

comprised of the Afar-dominated areas of Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Djibouti. The Afar historically have maintained only a weak relationship with the GSE, in part due to the isolated geography of this desolate and dry area of the country creating a limiting factor on the GSE's delivery of service to the region. The Commander of the Navy, General Ahmed Mohammed Karikare, is the most well-known Afar in Eritrea.

¶10. North of Massawa, in the Northern Red Sea zoba is the domain of the Rashaida. Extending up the coast into Eastern Sudan, this Muslim tribe is one of the smallest ethnic groups in Eritrea. Despite their size, they reportedly wield great influence as the organizers and business leaders who manage much of the black market activity supporting Eritrea's economy today. They are one of Eritrea's newest ethnic groups, arriving in Eritrea from the Arabian peninsula and Sudan two centuries ago. They are herdsman and smugglers and many Eritreans comment on their affinity for Toyota pickups and Land Cruisers. They are isolated from the other ethnic groups, particularly the highlanders, and like the Afar have an ethnic affiliation that often supersedes their nationality. Some Eritreans claim that the low representation of Rashaida in government positions is due to their nomadic lifestyle.

OUT WEST, IN THE LOWLANDS AND UNHAPPY: KUNAMA AND NARA

¶11. The Kunama live on the Badme plain and in the areas surrounding Barentu in western Eritrea. Formerly known as the Gash Seite region and now part of the Gash Barka zoba, the region is part of Eritrea's breadbasket and was ravaged during the 1998-2000 war. The Kunama's religious affiliations are a combination of Muslim, Catholic (converts during the Italian colonial period), and those practicing traditional animist Kunama beliefs. The Kunama, like the Afar of the Southern Red Sea, are fiercely independent and many of them believe they should not be part of Eritrea, or any other nation. The Democratic Movement for the Liberation of the Eritrean Kunama (DMLEK) is an active Kunama opposition party that seeks to separate Kunama lands from Eritrea and establish a Kunama state. Some foreigners and Kunama believe the GSE discriminates against the Kunama and that they are not provided with the same level of support

ASMARA 00000945 003 OF 004

by the GSE as the Tigrinya and Tigre people. They are a nomadic people traditionally and some Kunama live in Ethiopia. Some highlanders speak disparagingly about the Kunama, using derogatory terms for them, including "bariya," which means slave.

¶12. The Nara, who live in southwestern Eritrea near Tesseney and the Sudanese border, are one of the smallest ethnic groups in Eritrea and are predominantly Muslim. They are mainly farmers and pastoralists. Speaking a Nilotic language, they are often subject to discrimination and described in similarly negative terms as the Kunama. The facial markings the Nara men receive during rites of passage indicate their ethnic identity among the Eritreans. The GSE often recruits Nara to serve as police in Asmara, telling the Nara that the Asmarinos are mean and untrustworthy as a means to instigate tensions between the groups and prompt the Nara to act more forcefully toward the Asmarinos during round-ups and detention. The Nara have limited educational opportunities and are not well-represented in the GSE. Due to the high rate of poverty within the ethnic group and the limited opportunities available to them, some of those who are recruited by the GSE are reportedly just glad to have a meal and a place to sleep and are easy victims of the GSE's manipulation.

SMALL, PROUD, AND INFLUENTIAL: SAHO AND BLEN

¶13. The Bilen or Blen people are from the area surrounding Keren at the edge of the highlands. Mostly Muslim, some of them converted to Catholicism during the Italian colonial era for economic reasons. There are few Protestant Blen, and even fewer Orthodox Christians. They claim their origin in Ethiopia, having left Ethiopia several centuries ago due to persecution by Ethiopians and the Orthodox

Church. Historically, because of their geographic location at the edge of the highlands, many Blen are traders and entrepreneurs. Most small businesses in Keren are owned by the Blen. Reportedly because the Blen were well-represented in the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), few Blen are represented in the GSE today.

¶14. Living in the hilly region of southeastern Eritrea, the Saho people are mainly Muslims who live near Adi Keih and Senafe. Saho, like Blen, is a Cushitic language. Some believe that the Sahos are the third largest ethnic group in Eritrea. Primarily pastoral nomads and farmers, the Sahos have held most land of the region in common ownership, with some portions reserved for sub-group and then kinship use. Perceived by Eritreans as being better educated than other lowlanders and lowland Muslims (probably due to the region's proximity to Asmara and Massawa and the presence of the Catholic education system in Akeleguzay), they are perhaps the best represented of the non-Tigrinya ethnic groups in the government. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Osman Saleh is Saho. The Minister of Justice, Fowsiya Hashim is considered to be Saho as her father was Saho, although her mother is Djeberti.

CROSSING BORDERS: THE HEDAREB BEJA

¶15. The Beja people are Muslim pastoralists who routinely move from western Eritrea near Agordat across the border into eastern Sudan near Kassala and Gedaref in Sudan. There are approximately 3 million Beja, divided into at least five subgroups that move back and forth. The five primary subgroups are: Hadendowa, Amarir, Beni Amir, Bishriyyin, and Halenga. The Beni Amir and the Hadendowa Beja are the largest sub-groups in Eritrea and often collectively referred to as Hedareb. The Hedareb-Beja are considered by some to be the ninth ethnic group of Eritrea. The Hedareb-Beja speak Beja and many also speak Tigre or Arabic. Many Eritrean Hedareb-Beja intermarry with Beja in Eastern Sudan. The mother of Abdallah Jabir, Head of Organizational Affairs for the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), is reportedly from the Beni-Amir-Hedareb-Beja.

NIGERIANS IN ERITREA: THE TUKRIR

¶16. The Tukrir are the descendants of a Muslim Nigerian group that came across Africa on a pilgrimage to Mecca in the 1940's and on their return from the Hajj decided to stay in Eritrea. Not an official ethnic group of Eritrea, the relatively small number of Tukrir manage to maintain their own language. While some Tukrir

ASMARA 00000945 004.2 OF 004

emigrated to Asmara, most live near Tessenay in far western Eritrea.

NEW ADMINISTRATIVE LINES DRAWN: THE SIX ZOBAS

¶17. The re-designation of the areas from eight to six in 1996 drew lines through ethnic groups and religious affiliations, separated ethnic groups administratively, and split up the former provinces in a deliberate effort to destroy the strong affiliations to the provinces, dilute ethnic identities, and ultimately ensure no one group could become too strong. At the time, the GSE explained the restructuring as one based on "economic and geo-climatic homogeneity" and a policy that "takes as its basis national resources, demography infrastructure and the unity of our people." While the Southern Red Sea became more homogeneous for the Afar, the Northern Red Sea, Anseba, and Gash-Barka zobas became more ethnically diverse. During the division, the GSE also expressed an interest in the resettlement and increased mobility of the population in order to accelerate an inter-ethnic assimilation process. In reality, the new lines largely only added Tigrinya populations into areas which had been predominately occupied by other ethnic groups; many of these groups perceived this "Tigrinyaization" of historically non-Tigrinya regions of the

country negatively, as individuals from the Tigrinya groups are believed to have better access to resources and senior government positions in those regions. The Kunama, Nara, and Blen were the greatest "losers" in the creation of these new zobas, but the Saho, Tigre, and Hedareb-Beja were also significantly affected.

COMMENT

¶18. The GSE walks a fine line in trying to unite all of the different groups under the "one heart" of Eritrea while also reminding individuals to be proud of their ethnic heritage. On the surface, this effort appears to foster pride in Eritrea's diversity; however, many of the minority ethnic groups have a more sinister interpretation of GSE policies, believing the goal is to minimize ethnic and religious identities which might threaten the regime's control of the country. Lowland Muslims, while loyal to an Eritrean nation, often feel left out of the GSE and most of the known small opposition groups, such as the DMLEK or the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Union Front (ARDUF), stem from the lowland regions of the Southern Red Sea, the West, and the Northwest. Nonetheless, the Eritreans largely succeeded in creating a national identity during the struggle for independence. Today, the internal dynamics of the GSE are more dependent on individual relationships stemming back to this shared battle history rather than on ethnic or religious differences, despite the predominance of the Hamasien-Tigrinya in the GSE. The ethnic affiliations and tensions remain just under the surface of society, though, and most often come to the fore when grievances between groups arise. End Comment.

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